

War and wine: British responses to Rome

Dominic Rathbone

Boudicca's revolt: the story

In A.D. 61, eighteen years after Claudius' invasion of Britain, Boudicca led a fierce revolt against Roman rule. A basic narrative can be reconstructed from later Roman accounts. The Romans had not conquered the tribal groupings of the Iceni (Norfolk-Suffolk), but had lumped them together as an allied, nominally independent, kingdom under king Prasutagus. When Prasutagus died in 60, Nero's government decided to annex the kingdom so they could tax the Iceni; at this date little of Britain was paying taxes, and its slow conquest was costing a bomb (so to speak). When the order to annex came in 61, the governor Gaius Suetonius Paullinus decided to press on with his planned invasion of Anglesey. He was due to be replaced soon, and needed a big victory for which he could claim triumphal honours. So he left the job to the imperial finance officer (procurator), Decianus Catus. Big mistake.

Boudicca, the widow of Prasutagus, led the resistance. The Iceni were joined by the neighbouring Trinovantes (Essex-Suffolk) who had a particular grievance: around A.D. 10 the Catuvellauni (Hertfordshire-Middlesex) had re-absorbed them, contrary to Julius Caesar's arrangements in 54 B.C., but instead of being liberated in A.D. 43, they too were put under direct rule; worse still, around 49, a colony of Roman veterans, provocatively called Claudius' Victory Colony, was planted in their capital Camulodunum (Colchester) and territory. Boudicca's forces annihilated the garrisons left in the south-east, razed the cities of Colonia (Claudia) Victricensis, Londinium and Verulamium (St Albans), and slaughtered their inhabitants. The destruction has left a distinctive thick burnt layer at all of these sites. Some other tribes joined the revolt, but others did not, including the Catuvellauni and the Atrebates (West Sussex-Hampshire). Boudicca and Suetonius Paullinus both had to stake all on a quick decisive battle, somewhere in the Midlands. Boudicca lost and died, but had almost won the war. The disaster made Nero's government consider withdrawing from Britain.

Roman attitudes: the 'beneficial ideology'

What made Britons accept Roman rule or fight it? Romans, and some of their subjects, pointed to the benefits of Roman rule: peace, prosperity, and the chance to join the rulers of the empire as an equestrian official or senator. Modern historians call this 'the beneficial ideology'. Subsequent empires have been more organised and systematic about implementing the same idea, and have added religious conversion, but although the Romans had no government programme for 'Romanisation', it was something they consistently encouraged. A striking example is Tacitus' description of what his father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, did in 79/80 as governor of Britain:

The following winter was spent on very beneficial schemes. The Britons were rough country-dwellers, therefore quick to start wars. To accustom them to peace and leisure through the good life, Agricola urged them as individuals, and aided them as communities, to erect temples, forums and town-houses. He praised the energetic and scolded the slack, so that competition for status replaced

compulsion. He also educated the sons of the chiefs in the liberal arts, and thought British talent superior to Gallic training. As a result, men who had previously shunned the Latin language became keen to speak it well. So too even our clothing gained status, and the toga was often worn. Gradually the Britons succumbed to the charms of decadence - fine buildings, hot baths and smart parties. Naively they called this 'culture', when it was part of their enslavement.

The rare sympathy for the Britons and cynicism about the real beneficiaries of the conquest may reflect Agricola's personal views. He knew from personal experience that the Britons were 'quick to start wars'. Unusually, he had already served as an officer twice in Britain, first at the time of Boudicca's revolt, then in the early 70s conquering the Brigantes (northern England) after their revolt. He also saw that it took two to 'toga'; the Britons could not be compelled, but had to be persuaded to want to 'Romanise'.

British responses: what did they really really want?

Roman writers say very little about British attitudes to Rome, or British society and history in general. Fortunately, the Britons can still whisper to us through archaeological traces of their life-style and death-style. British social and political organisation seems to have been much more fluid than historians (and indeed the Romans) find convenient. Tribal groupings absorbed others, split up, then reformed in different patterns, like blobs of heated oil; some leaders extended their authority over several areas, while others had to share power, or move elsewhere. 'Tribal' maps of Iron Age Britain are a misleading attempt to impose Roman-style order. To rival leaders and tribal groupings Roman goods and Roman power presented new resources to be used in this struggle.

From around 100 B.C., long before any Roman thought of 'Romanising' them, the British élite had been acquiring luxury Italian goods, including wine for the heavy-drinking banquets whose conspicuous consumption increased the prestige which gave a leader authority and followers. Celtic drinking stunned the Celts and stunned Greek and Roman observers. Already in the first century B.C., the Greco-Roman geographer and philosopher Posidonius observed that:

The Gauls are extraordinary wine-addicts who gulp down the wine brought by merchants without diluting it. In their enthusiasm they drink furiously and get drunk, which makes them fall asleep or behave madly.

Around 25 B.C. a chieftain was buried at Welwyn Garden City with status symbols including Italian metal and ceramic drinking vessels and five Italian winejars, each holding 25 litres. Around 15-10 B.C., the extraordinarily rich grave-goods of another chief, buried in the Lexden Tumulus at Camulodunum, included a chain-mail corselet, a silver medallion of Augustus, and at least seventeen Italian winejars (a different type, but each still 25 litres: enough for a big party). Other new ideas of leadership among the Britons included calling yourself *rex* (king), and minting coins with Roman-style symbols and lettering, like

those found in Norfolk bearing the name Esuprastos (in the British Museum), probably the real name of Prasutagus. This may also indicate some economic development, and more sophisticated government and taxation. Leaders who lost power even looked for Roman support and fled to Rome, as the last independent ruler of the Trinovantes had done around A.D. 10.

To make Claudius' invasion easier, the Romans were able to do deals with leaders and tribal groupings who were rivals of the Catuvellauni, such as Cogidubnus of the Atrebatas, who then kept his tribes out of the Boudiccan revolt, and Prasutagus himself. They were rewarded with expanded areas of authority, substantial gifts, and perhaps a palace (Fishbourne) for Cogidubnus' family. Even the defeated Britons now put under direct rule found some compensations. The Romans needed them to run their tribes and raise taxes, which could be profitable for them too. Verulamium, the main centre of the Catuvellauni, began to develop as a Roman-style administrative and economic centre, although the nobles preferred to live at their country bases where they soon built villas in Romano-Gallic style with a central reception room, very handy for the traditional banquets.

Three burials in a cemetery (Stanway) at Camulodunum from shortly before the Boudiccan revolt reveal responses of Trinovantian nobles: one with a spear and shield and smart Romano-Gallic tableware, a warrior whom the Romans had failed to disarm; another with some Roman surgical instruments and a set of metal rods and rings probably used for divination, perhaps a Druid assimilating classical medicine; a third with an inkpot, who must have learned to read and write in the only written language going, Latin. But administrative co-operation and cherry-picking of Roman culture do not mean loyalty.

Boudicca's revolt: causes and results

When the beneficiaries of Roman rule revolted against it, the Romans, like later empires and modern institutions, tried to blame a few bad apples in the barrel. Resistance by the Iceni to annexation was unexpected, so it must have been the fault of the brutal and incompetent procurator. The Trinovantes had been provoked by the arrogant and grasping veterans, and by tricky businessmen who lent them money to pay taxes – but on extortionate terms. Another Roman scam is indicated by the 172 fake denarii, made around A.D. 50 with a copper core and silver plating, which were found in Suffolk (now in the British Museum). But even if abuses were minimised, the Britons, as Agricola knew, were still deeply ambivalent about Roman rule.

The revolt tore Governor Suetonius Paullinus' CV to shreds. No triumphal honours now. He ordered savage reprisals, presumably with the ultimate aim of abandoning Britain. In contrast, the new procurator, Gaius Julius Alpinus Classicianus, a Gallic chief and living proof of the benefits of Romanisation, believed it could still work in Britain too (he died here; his tomb is dead proof in the British Museum). Nero sent a freedman bureaucrat, Polybius, to investigate, on full expenses. The rest is history, or legend. The conquest dragged on, and revolts continued. British nobles showed no enthusiasm for integration until the fourth century, which was a bit too late. And Boudicca became Boadicea, icon of the English 'no, no, no' to Europe.

Dominic Rathbone teaches Roman history at King's College London, and drinks Italian wine.

For illustrations of the Stanway and Welwyn Garden City burials, and Classicianus' tomb, and more information about the Britons and the Boudiccan revolt, see the websites of the Colchester Archaeological Trust and the British Museum: <http://www.colchester-arch-trust.co.uk> (under 'Excavations'); <http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk> (use 'Compass').